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ABSTRACT

In an examination of the notion of person-environment fit as it applies to the socioempathy-social status for mildly handicapped children in mainstreamed and special class settings, 38 mildly learning handicapped (LH) and 234 nonhandicapped students were administered social status instruments. Results revealed that LH Ss in special placements were more well known and more accepted in the setting than those in the regular class setting. In terms of the discrepancy between social status and socioempathy, LH Ss in regular classes overestimated their popularity and LH Ss in special classes slightly underestimated their popularity. The greater discrepancy found in the regular classroom could have consequences for their ultimate adjustment, as postulated in person-environment fit theory. LH Ss in resource rooms were just as well known in both regular and special class environments but slightly more accepted by their peers in the resource classrooms. LH Ss in resource rooms overestimated their popularity in both the resource room and the regular class. Results suggested that LH Ss' perceptions were more congruent with reality in the special class environment. Other findings included that chances for a good "fit" for LH Ss were greater in the special class environment than in the regular class setting. (CL)

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Social Status and Social Perceptual Abilities of Mildly Handicapped Learners: Methodological and Substantive Implications

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Despite the fact that social acceptance of mildly retarded children has been used as a major outcome variable for determining classroom placement efficacy since the 1950's, we still know little more than the fact that these children are less accepted and more rejected than their nonhandicapped peers. The research study that I will describe for you today, is one of a series of investigations that have attempted to expand the meaningfulness of typical socio-metric measurement devices and their appropriateness for describing the social situations in which mildly handicapped children are placed within the public school system. Additionally, the importance of considering methodological questions as they interact with those of substance will be underscored and applied to the examination of an alternate perspective of social status; that is, socioempathy (one's ability to accurately assess his/her own social status).

Given the inadvisability of considering substantive questions separately from methodological and contextual considerations, I will be combining the discussions of each. The study of children within the context of their schooling experience is inherently complex. One must always consider the effect of such social psycho-logical variables as nature of the peer group, interactions with the teacher, and arrangement of instructional delivery systems. Considering the potential influence of these variables, the study of the social relations of mildly retarded children becomes even more complicated because of the nature of our educational arrangements for them. Consider for a moment the situation in California, where mildly handicapped children experience one of two administrative arrangements. One arrangement is where the mildly handi-capped child is placed for the majority of the day in a regular classroom and leaves this class-room for a few hours each day to receive remedial instruction in a resource room. Another

arrangement is for the child to be placed in a special day class for most if not all of the day. These children may experience "mainstreaming" for a short period of time for academic or, most likely, nonacademic subjects. The arrangements that I have described vary on several important dimensions: (1) the amount of time spent in regular vs. special settings, (2) the number of peers in each setting, (3) the type of peer (handicapped vs. nonhandicapped) in each setting, and, of course, (4) the teacher. These variables will most likely affect the nature of the social interactions and acceptance that a mildly handicapped child would experience.

The effect of these contextual variables can be seen in an earlier study by myself (Morrison, 1981a) that examined the various sociometric methods of measurement and their differential meanings in describing the social status of mildly handicapped children in mainstreamed settings. Briefly, the results of the study suggested that, as sociometrics go, a group preference record format was perhaps more appropriate than the nomination format for describing mildly handicapped children in an integrated regular class setting. Whereas, the group preference record requires reactions to all children, the nomination format only elicits reactions to "favorites." Therefore, although we got a measure of general acceptance from the group preference form for the mildly handicapped children (because the response was required) it was rare that the mildly handicapped child got nominated at all with the nomination method. It seems that these children, because of the reduced amount of time spent in the regular classroom and resulting reduced interactions, did not come to mind as significant others, either in a positive or a negative sense. The distinction being described here is similar to one described in some of Steve Asher's work--i.e., the distinction between friendship and acceptance. Perhaps

generalized acceptance as measured by a group preference record is more realistic to expect for a mildly handicapped child in a mainstreamed situation, as opposed to the more selective and intense reaction elicited by the nomination method. Thus, methodology and context are important considerations in describing the social situation for mildly handicapped children.

These considerations also have proved to be significant for the examination of socioempathic abilities of mildly handicapped children. Early research literature pertaining to socioempathy suggested that mildly handicapped children overestimate their social status; that is, they think they are more popular thay they really are. However, in one of my earlier studies (Morrison, 1981b) the evidence suggested that these abilities varied according to the classroom administration arrangement being considered. Although mildly handicapped children in this study overestimated their popularity in regular classroom situations, they could accurately assess their social status in special class environments among their handicapped peers.

Aside from, once again, the contextual implications of the variations in socioempathic abilities of these children, questions arise about the effects on mildly handicapped children of being poor assessors of their own social status or poor perceivers of the social situation in general, which has been suggested by the research of Tanis Bryan with learning disabled children and Steve Greenspan with mentally retarded children. Does the lack of socioempathy contribute to their popularity or lack thereof?

A theoretical framework which may help to examine and explain the concepts about which I am speaking is the model of person-environment fit described by Feather (1975) and Pervin (1968). The concept of person-environment (P-E) congruence focuses on the extent to which characteristics

of the person match those of the environment to which he or she is commonly exposed. The assumption is that the better the fit, the more favorable the consequences for the person. Specific to our topic today, one might hypothesize that a child who accurately perceives his or her social status situation would "fit" better in that environment than in one where the perception was not as accurate. Further it would be expected from this hypothesis that the child would be more popular in the environment where his or her perceptions were congruent with "reality." A model for the hypothesized person-environment fit curve is presented in Figure 1.

The study that I will describe today explores the notion of person-environment fit as it applies to the socioempathy-social status relationship for mildly handicapped children in mainstreamed and special class settings. Differences in social status, as measured by various sociometric measurement devices, between mainstreamed and special class environments will be examined also.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 38 mildly learning handicapped (LH) and 234 nonhandicapped children from six schools located in three Southern California counties. Of the 40 LH children, 27 attended self-contained special day classes (LHSC) and 13 attended resource room programs (LHRR).

Learning handicapped (LH), as used in this report, is a term used in California specified by a master plan for special education. LH children include children who more traditionally have been labeled educable mentally retarded, learning disabled, or behavior disordered. Because of this attempt to treat these various exceptionalities noncategorically and because of the great amount of system identification variability in who

gets labeled what and who gets treated where, attempts to differentiate between "types" of children in various categories and placements is hazardous. The focus, therefore, is switched to an emphasis on the external validity of the sample. Results of studies of LH children can at best be generalized to those mildly handicapped children who experience learning difficulties to such an extent that special education services are deemed necessary.

Procedure

The social status instruments that I will be describing were administered in both regular and special class environments. In the regular class situation, questionnaires were filled out by both handicapped and nonhandicapped children about each other. In the special class environment, questionnaires were completed by the handicapped children about each other. In other words, social status instruments were completed twice by the LH children; once in the regular classroom and once in the special classroom.

Instrumentation and Scoring

HIFTO. The HIFTO scale is a sociometric technique that requires each child to respond to every other child in the classroom in terms of how much he or she likes those children. The following four responses are available: indicates that the respondent is not acquainted with the child, indicates that the respondent likes this particular child and considers him or her a friend, indicates that the respondent does not care one way or the other about the child, and indicates that the respondent does not like the child and does not condiser him or her a friend. The children were assured that there are no right or wrong answers and that their answers would be kept secret. They were given five examples using animal names to ensure that the procedures were understood.

Scores used throughout the analyses were calculated for each of the

four responses with the following formula: number of nomination/number of nominators minus 1. Thus, each child had a percentage score for acquaintance, acceptance, toleration, and rejection.

Socioempathy HIFTO. In order to measure each child's perception of his of her own social status, a socioempathy form of the HIFTO sociometric technique was created. The HIFTO format of "face" responses to each class member was used. Children were instructed to "guess" how every child in the class felt about them: A question mark indicates nonacquaintance; a happy face indicates that the respondent thinks the child considers him a friend; a neutral face indicates that the respondent thinks the child does not care one way or the other about him; and a sad face indicates that the respondent thinks the child does not consider him a friend. A mnemonic expression was provided on the form to assist the subjects in responding to the socioempathic frame of reference (e.g., "I think Johnny gave me a happy face").

The scores used to compare the social status and socioempathy HIFTO scales were the weighted average of the acceptance through rejection responses. In other words, a three was assigned to the number of acceptance responses, a two to the toleration responses, and a one to the rejection responses. The weighted average was then calculated for each subject. The HIFTO socioempathy score was then subtracted from the HIFTO social status score to get a discrepancy score between perceived and actual social status.

Nomination method. The peer nomination method requests each child to choose three classmates that he or she would like to be grouped with and three children that he or she would not like to be grouped with in each of three sociometric criteria: an academic activity, a social activity, and a

sports activity.

The following instructions were given to all subjects: (a) choose classmates that are in your class (physical education, music, reading, etc.), (b) you may choose a student for more than one group situation if you wish, and (c) your choices will not be seen by anyone else. Acceptance and rejection scores were calculated by combining the number of nominations received in each situation (as a result class members and number of nominators increased threefold) and using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Number of nominations} \times \frac{\text{Number of class members}}{\text{Number of nominators}}}{\text{Number of class members} - 1}$$

This formula was used to correct for the fact that the nominators were a subset of the class members.

Results and Discussion

In order to compare the social status of the LH children in the regular and special class settings, correlated t-tests were performed for the HIFTO and Nomination sociometric scores. Differences were examined also for the social status-socioempathy discrepancy score. The means and standard deviations for these comparisons can be seen in Table 1. The following differences were found.

Learning handicapped children who attend special-day class placements were more well known and more accepted in the special class setting according to the HIFTO measure. Thus, the special class environment seems to be a more accepting and positive one for these children. They received significantly more nominations (positive and negative) on the nomination measure. This pattern of results is of methodological and substantive significance. In the regular classrooms these children are rarely mentioned. However, in their special-day classrooms, they are nominated at

similar levels, both positively and negatively. Thus, the special-day classroom can be described as a more "intense" social environment for them.

The discrepancy between social status and socioempathy occurs in opposite directions for the LHSC children. In the regular class environment, they overestimate their popularity; in the special class environment they slightly underestimate their popularity. The discrepancy in the regular classroom is greater. According to person-environment fit theory, this discrepancy could have consequences for the ultimate adjustment of these children.

Turning now to the LH children who attend resource rooms, according to the HIFTO, these children are just as well known in both regular and special class environments but slightly more accepted by their peers in the resource classrooms. Again, the data suggest a more positive situation exists for these children in the special class setting.

As with the LHSC group, the LHRR children receive more positive and more negative nominations in the special class setting, reflecting a greater intensity in social interactions. However, the difference for the rejection score is not significant, probably due to the greater number of negative nominations received in the regular class setting. Resource room children may be in the regular class enough time to have a negative impact on their peers.

Upon examination of the discrepancy between social status and socioempathy for the LHRR children, it is interesting to note that they overestimate their popularity in both environments. Although their "fit" with the special class environment is slightly better, a discrepancy exists for both settings. This pattern raises some questions about the overall adjustment of these children. Although the LHSC children at least get "relief" in

their special-day class as far as conflict between reality and their perceptions, the LHRR children do not have this advantage. Further evidence is needed to determine if these patterns are meaningful in terms of the ultimate adjustment of these children.

In order to explore further the notion of person environment fit, the subjects in this study were divided into three groups according to the social status-socioempathy discrepancy scores that I have described previously. This division was accomplished through the use of a cluster analysis, a multivariate technique designed to develop groupings of individuals with similar profiles on a number of variables. Subjects were characterized as underestimators, accurate estimators or overestimators.

The percentages of each of these groups for the regular and special classroom environments are presented in Table 2. Note that the percentage of accurate estimators among the LH group increases from the regular to special classroom environment. The percentage of under- and overestimators decreases with the exception of LHRR children who exhibit the same account of overestimation. Overall, these results suggest, as with the previous results, that LH children's perceptions are more in concert with "reality" in the special classroom environments.

The socioempathy groups were then compared on the various indices of popularity within the two classroom environments. The results of these comparisons are graphed in a format that approximates the hypothesized model of person-environment fit. Separate graphs are presented for groups in each classroom setting. In addition, 3 x 3 (group X socioempathy category) analyses of variance were performed with sociometric indices as dependent variables to determine main effects for groups and socioempathy categories and possible interactions between these two factors.

For illustrative purposes, the analyses for the dependent variables of HIFTO acceptance and HIFTO rejection are illustrated in Figure 2. Starting with the acceptance variable, the difference in popularity between the socioempathy groups is significant and approximates (albeit crudely) the hypothesized model. Accurate estimators of social acceptance are more popular than either under- or overestimators. This pattern is evident for both classroom settings, the major difference being that the curve is higher for the special classroom setting (this represents the more positive nature of the special class setting).

An inverted pattern can be seen for rejection. Accurate estimators of social acceptance are not as highly rejected as under- or overestimators. The level of rejection is similar across environments.

Similar differences between the socioempathy groups were found for the other sociometric indices but will not be detailed at this time. Main effects for LH and regular subject groups in the regular classroom setting were found for all sociometric indices, representing the generally lower acceptance rate of the LH children.

Differences across socioempathy groups were not significant for the HIFTO question mark variable. In other words, how well known children are to each other does not affect how accurately they can estimate their own social status. Although the LHSC group was not as well known to their regular class peers (and probably visa versa), this factor was not a significant one in terms of differentiating groups in terms of their socioempathic accuracy.

The present results suggest that the person-environment fit framework is potentially useful for understanding the relationship between social status and socioempathy. Children who are not accurate estimators of their

social status also suffer in terms of popularity. The fit between their perceptions and "reality" is not a good one, and this lack of fit is related to a decreased level of popularity. This pattern is evident across special and regular classroom environments.

In addition to the relationship between person-environment fit and popularity, the present results suggest that the chances for a good "fit" for LH children are greater in the special class environment than they are in the regular class setting. The greater "positiveness" of the special classroom setting for LH children is reflected also in the comparison of the sociometric scores that they received in the two settings.

The trend I have described for special day class children is not as marked for the resource room children. Although these children experience more acceptance by resource room peers, they still do a good deal of over-estimating. The differences between resource room and special day class children are interesting, complex, and in need of further exploration.

The trend that is apparent in these data that describes special classroom settings as being more supportive for LH children should not be interpreted in the light of a for-or-against argument for mainstreaming. The realization by professionals in the field of special education that there is no unilateral yes or no answer to the problem of whether or not to mainstream is becoming more prevalent.

A more appropriate question to ask might be one such as under <u>what</u> circumstances is <u>which</u> classroom setting most appropriate for <u>which</u> children. This question involves determination of the nature of the outcome variable used, a description of the classroom settings involved and an appreciation for the variability in child characteristics.

The suggestion from the present data is that consideration should be

made of both person and environment and the fit between these when describing the appropriateness of the classroom setting. Given the particular groups utilized in the present study, the special classroom setting represents a positive environment in terms of social acceptance and one in which the match between perception and reality is better than that in the regular class setting.

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